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SZKO the BASTARD

A TALE OF POLISH GRIEF

ALFRED AUSTIN

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LESZKO THE BASTARD.

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LESZKO THE BASTARD:

A Tale of Polish Grief.

BY

ALFRED AUSTIN.

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LOAN STACK

953
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TO
THE MOST EMINENT PHILANTHROPIST
OF HIS AGE,

This Poem is Dedicated

WITH PROFOUND HOMAGE;

IN THE EARNEST HOPE

THAT IT MAY ENGAGE HIS SYMPATHY, AND SECURE HIS ZEAL,
FOR THE MOST OPPRESSED OF SCLAVONIC COMMUNITIES,
AND THE MOST PERSECUTED OF CHRISTIAN NATIONS.

June 16th, 1877.



LESZKO THE BASTARD.

A Tale of Polish Grief.

“WHY do I bid the rising gale

To waft me from your shore ?

Why hail I, as the vultures hail,

The scent of far-off gore ?

Why wear I with defiant pride

The Paynim's badge and gear,

Though I am vowed to Christ that died,

And fain would staunch the gaping side

That felt the sceptic spear ?

And why doth one in whom there runs

The blood of Sclavic sires and sons,
In those but find a foe,
That onward march with sword and flame,
To vindicate the Sclavic name,
From the fringe of Arctic snows,
To the cradle of the rose,

Where the Sweet Waters flow ?
Strange ! But 'twere stranger yet if I,
When Turk and Tartar splinters fly,
Lagged far behind the van.

While the wind dallies with my sail,
Listen ! and you shall hear my tale ;
Then marvel, if you can !

“ Nothing but snow ! A white waste world,
Far as eye reached, or voice could call !

Motion within itself slept furled ;

The earth was dead, and Heaven its pall !

Now nothing lived except the wind,

That, moaning round with restless mind,

Seemed like uncoffined ghost to flit

O'er vacant tracts, that it might find

Some kindred thing to speak with it.

Nothing to break the white expanse !

No far, no near, no high, no low !

Nothing to stop the wandering glance !

One smooth monotony of snow !

I lifted the latch, and I shivered in ;

My mother stood by the larch-log blaze,

My mother, stately, and tall, and thin,

With the shapely head and the soft white skin,

And the sweetly-sorrowing gaze.

She was younger than you, aye, you who stand

In matron prime by your household fire,

A happy wife in a happy land,

And with all your heart's desire.

But though bred, like you, from the proud and
brave,

Her hair was blanched and her voice was grave.

If you knew what it is to be born a slave,

And to feel a despot's ire !

“ She turned her round from the hearth like one

That hath waited long, and said,

‘ Come hither, and sit by me, my son !

For somehow to-night doth remembrance run

Back to the days that are dead.

And you are tall and stalwart now,

*And coming manhood o'er your brow

Its shadow 'gins to shed.

Sit by me close !' and as I sate

Close, close as I could sit,

She took my hand and placed it flat

On hers, and fondled it.

Then with the same soft palm she brushed

My wind-tossed locks apart,

And, kissing my bared temples, hushed

The flow of love that else had gushed,

Love-loosened, from my heart.

“ ‘ Listen ! you often have questioned why

Here 'neath this pale Siberian sky,

You scarcely live, I slowly die.

That we dwell on, but exiles here,

In regions barren, sunless, drear,
And have no more the power to fly
To brighter lands and bluer sky,
Than some poor bird whom man's caprice
Hath tethered by a clanking chain,
And leaves upon its perch in pain
To pine for, ne'er to find release,—
This do you know, and still have known
Since first I taught your mouth to frame
The syllables of Poland's name,
Even before my own.
But how could I to childhood's ears,
Or boyhood's, tell the tale of tears
That links me with the bygone years?—
Tale steeped in rapture, drenched with woe,
A tale of wrong, and loss, and love,

That opens in the heavens above,
And ends in worse than hell below?—
A tale I only could impart
To mind mature and full-grown heart ;
A tale to fill your larger life
With hissing waters of distress
And overflowing bitterness,
And set you with yourself at strife ?
But you must hear it now. The down
Of manhood fringes lip and cheek ;
Your temples take a richer brown,
And on your forehead buds the crown
Of kingly thought that yet will speak.
Listen ! and let no faintest word
Of all I utter fall unheard
Upon your ear or heart !

'Twill wring your youth, but nerve it too :—
And what have I now left to do,
But unveil tyranny to view,
And wing the avenging dart ?

“ ‘ So like to you ! The same blue eye,
Same lavish locks, same forehead high,
But of a manlier majesty !
His limbs, like yours, were straight and strong,
Yet supple as the bough in bud ;
For tyrants cannot tame the blood,
Or noble lineage lose, through wrong
Its heritage of hardihood.
And maybe since his years were more,
And partly that you needs must bear
In every filial vein and pore

With his pure strain the base alloy

Of that in you which is *my* share,

Though you are tall and comely, boy !

Yet he was taller, comelier.

In days that now but live in song,

When Rurik's hinds felt Poland's heel,

And Poland's horsemen, cased in steel,

To Volo's plain were wont to throng,

A hundred thousand manes in strength,

And vowed, if Heaven let fall the sky,

To uphold it on their lance's length

As 'twere a silken canopy ;

His sires were there in gallant trim,

Haught of mien and hard of limb—

Visors up and foreheads gashed,

Swords that poised, and swooped, and flashed,

Like the wings of the flaming Cherubim !

And when Imperial vultures tore

With banded beaks Sarmatia's breast,

And wallowed in Sarmatia's gore,

His fathers by their fathers swore

Ne'er to recede nor rest,

Till they had pushed the watchful points

Of vengeance in between the joints

Of armour dear to tyrants pricked

Of conscience never hushed nor tricked,

And made them feel what they inflict.

Vow sternly kept, but kept in vain !

For ninety hoping, hopeless years,

Poland hath known no couch save pain,

No mate except the dull cold chain,

Hath felt the lash, and fed on jeers,

While Heaven, it seems, no longer hears
The wail of prayers, the drip of tears,
Or the voices of the slain.
Thrice have her sons, despite their gyves,
Essayed to sell their worthless lives
At least against the price
Of ruin on their gaolers brought ;
But each brave stroke hath come to nought,
And blood, and wounds, and death, have brought,
Only fresh bootless sacrifice.
No blow was struck they did not share,
No banner raised, but straight they flew
For one more tussle with despair ;
And ever as they fought, they fell,
Waxing still fewer and more few,
Till only one remained to tell

How they had passed away, and dare
With front erect and unquelled stare
Those earthly ministers of hell.

One only of that kindred band—

Like some last column gazing lone
Across the bare and brackish sand,
In a depopulated land,

Telling of times and temples flown !

.

“ ‘ He loved me. Love in every clime,
Through all vicissitudes of time,
Is life’s climacteric and prime.

Matched against it, all boons that bless,

All joys we chase, all good we prize,
All that of tender and sublime

Expands the heart and fills the eyes,

Tastes pitiful and savourless.

It glorifies the common air,

It clothes with light the mountains bare,

And shows the heavens all shining there.

It lifts our feet from off the ground,

It lets us walk along the skies ;

It makes the daily silence sound

With transcendental harmonies.

It rules the seasons. Linnets sing

As loud in winter as in spring,

When hearts are leal, and love is king.

Bathed in its light, the distance glows

With all the colours of the rose.

Its vivid gaze blends far and near

In one delicious atmosphere,

Projects the future from the past,

And hugs the faith, without a fear,
Since love is all, that all will last.
The peevish voice of doubt grows dumb ;
The demons of dejection flee ;
And even sordid cares become
But a divine anxiety.

Hope sails no more in far-off skies,
But makes its nest upon the ground ;
And happiness, coy wing that flies
Too oft when mortal yearning woos,
At love's sweet summons circling round,
Sits on the nearest bough, and coos.

“ ‘ Yes ! such is love in every land,
If blest or curst, enslaved or free.
But how can they whose chainless hand

May stretch towards all they dream or see,
Whose lungs exult, whose lives expand,
In air of bracing liberty,
Feel love's delirium like to those

Who, of all other bliss bereft,
And cooped from each hale wind that blows,
Fondle, amid a world of foes,

The solitary friend that's left ?
Through whatso regions freemen roam,
They find a hearth, they make a home.
Their unfenced energies embrace
All realms of thought, all fields of space,
At each fresh step fresh prospects find,
Larger than any left behind,
And mount with still rewarded stress
From happiness to happiness.

E'en love itself for such can bring
To life's tuned lyre but one more string,
Or but with fingers subtly straying
Among the chords, and softly playing,
Make more harmonious everything.
But when to him whose hopes are bound
Within a dismal prison round,
Whose thoughts, suspected, must not soar
Beyond his straitened dungeon floor,
Who may not speak, nor groan, nor sigh,
Nor lend sharp agony a vent,
Lest those should hear him who are nigh,
And catch, perchance, in passing by,
Contagion from his discontent ;
Who dwells an exile in his home,
And cannot rest and may not roam ;

Whom even hope doth not delude ;
Who vainly lives, in vain would die,
And, hemmed in close, alike would fly,
Society and solitude ;—

Oh ! when to such as he love brings
Message of heaven upon its wings,
It fills his heart, it floods his brain,
Riots in every pulse and vein,
And turns to paradise his pain.
Body, and soul, and sense conspire
To feed the rising, rushing fire.

The passions which are wont to share
Love's empire o'er distracted man,
Denied their outlet, in him fan
The exclusive fury of desire.

As one who faints of thirst, he takes

Swiftly what should be slowly quaffed,
With ravenous lips his fever slakes,
Then dies, delirious, of the draught !

“ ‘ He loved me. Do you ask if I
His love returned ? Go, ask the sky
If it in vain pours sun and shower
On herb and leaf, on tree and flower.
Go, ask of echo if it wakes

When voice in lonely places calls ;
Ask of the silence if it takes

The sound of plashing waterfalls :
Ask the parched plains if they refuse
The solace of descending dews ;
Ask the unrippled lake that lies
Under faint fleecy clouds that flit,

If it reflects with tender eyes
The heavenly forms that gaze on it ;
But ask not me if I returned
The love with which his being burned.
His passion such, in any heart
It straight had worked its counterpart,
Woke its own echo, roused a tone
In perfect concert with its own,
And made, the instant that it shone,
Mirror of what it gazed upon.

“ ‘ We loved, as few have loved before,
’Chance none ; and lo ! the hour drew nigh
To ratify the vows we swore
One night beneath the sky,
Before the solemn altar-rails

O'er which He hangs, pierced through with nails,
Who for our sins did die.

Oh! why is woman doomed to bear

The love, or lust, she cannot share ;

And hear from alien lips the sighs

She fain herself would waken ne'er,

Save within kindred hearts and eyes ?

Never by word, nor glance, nor e'en

That barren courtesy we give

Unto well nigh all things that live,

Did his detested rival glean

That I another's homage should

Not greet, as evil is by good.

But, had my heart been free as air,

Fickle as wind, as quick to take

Impression as some limpid lake

That every wanton breath can stir,
How had it ruffled been by one
Who wore the livery of the brood
By whom, with hands in blood imbrued,
Thrice had my country been undone ?
But I, nor free, nor false, nor light,
Bound both to Poland, and to him
Who yearned for Poland's wrongs to fight,
Had rather torn been limb from limb,
Than share with such love's last delight !
I answered softly, not in scorn ;
For in what guise soe'er it come,
Because of gentle longings born,
Love should leave indignation dumb.
But he was, like his shifty race,
Disloyal, cunning, vengeful, base,

And when he heard the lips of fate,
Love in him straightway turned to hate,
Even before my face !

He menaced me with vengeance dire.

He knew my lover, brother, sire,

All rebels to the core.

And in the rush of lustful ire,

By his schismatic saints he swore,

That ruin, exile, death, should fall

With speedy stroke upon them all,

Unless I fed his foul desire.

I knew it was no idle boast ;

He had the power to fetter, slay,

Abetted by a servile host,

Perjured, suborned by bribes to say

Whatever falsehood pleased him most.

Yet then I bridled not my scorn,
But poured upon his dastard head
All that by woman can be said,
When she confronts, before her eyes,
Creature created to despise,
And, since of manlier weapons shorn,
Can only *wish* him dead.
“Beware!” he croaked, with passion hoarse,
“Within your patriot arms shall lie,
Repelled or welcomed, none but I ;
And what you now to love deny,
You yet shall yield to fear or force.”
With scorn yet fiercer than at first
I flashed, and bade him work his worst.
“Before to-morrow’s sun hath set,”
He answered, “I shall pay the debt

Of vengeance, never baffled yet.

Think not to foil me or to fly!

I ever do the thing I would."

Then laughing loud, he went ; and I

Hated the ground where late he stood.

" ' The Night lay encamped in the summer sky,

And the burning stars kept watch ;

All were asleep upon earth save I,

Who had waited the hour and lifted the latch,

And crept out noiselessly.

The air was as silent as love or death,

Except for the beat of my quickened breath,

And once the lonely belated wail

Of an answered nightingale.

I dared not quicken my steps, for fear

The silence should listening be, and hear.

Slowly, stealthily, foot by foot.

Girding my garments tightly round,

Lest they should touch and tell the ground,

I threaded the laurel-walk and passed

On to the latchet-gate, and put

My hand on the creaking key, aghast

Lest the first stage of flight should prove the last.

Through ! and out in the meadows beyond,

With the cooling grass-dews round my feet,

Which would tell the tale of my journey fond,

But too late to hinder its purpose sweet ;

Over the narrow and swaying planks.

That span the neck of the marish pool

Where the tall spear-lilies close their ranks,

And the water-hens nestle safe and cool.

Then into the gloomy, darksome wood
Where the trunks seemed ghosts, and the big
 boughs stood

As though they would block my way.

Woman's love is stronger than woman's fright,
And though dogged by dread, yet I faced that night
 What I ne'er had faced by day.

O the blessèd break, and the blank without,
 From each grinning bole and each staring leaf !
I clutched my temples, and gave a shout ;

It was mad, but it brought relief.

And then with a saner fear I stopped

 To know if my foolish cry was heard.

But, like to a stream where a stone is dropped,
 The silence was only a moment stirred,
And stillness closed over the hazard word.

“ “ I was there ! in the garden where first I lent

My ear to the trembling music of love,

And my soul succumbed to its blandishment.

I was there ! I could smell the syringa's scent

And the lilac plumes that loomed dark above,

But, like to the heart that keeps away

True to its friends, when friends betray,

Was lending the night that hid from view

Its delicate tufts and tender hue,

Odours sweeter than e'en by day.

The laburnum tassels brushed my cheek,

And the tangled clematis clutched my hair ;

But I hurried along ; though my limbs were weak,

I was strengthened by despair.

A moment more, and I should be

Hard by the window where he slept.

How should I wake him ? how should flee,

 If another o'erheard my voice ? I crept

Softly, silently, over the sward.

The walls were dark, and the windows barred,

 All saving—Yes, 'twas he ! 'twas he !

Leaning out of his casement, lowly

Singing a love-song, sweetly, slowly,

 That he first had sung to *me*.

He saw me not. He was gazing free

Across the dark, mysterious air,

 At the shining stars, at the solemn sky,

At the unattainable far and fair,

The infinite something around, above,

 With which, when alone, we identify

The finite thing we love.

I stood, and listened, and drank each note

Of love that came from the yearning throat,
As it rose, as it fell, as it floated and died ;

And then with that courage that oft will spring,
When we have not time to think,

And impulse whispers the blessed thing
From which resolve would shrink,

I with the song replied.

“ ‘ One instant, and the echoed song,

The night, the dark, the heavens bare,

And all that was of far and fair,

And all that was of sweet and strong,

Seemed gathered into one embrace,

And showered their magic on my face.

His arms were round me, and his breath

As close to mine as life to death.

He murmured things I could not hear,
For I was deaf with bliss and fear.
Dumb, too ; in vain I strove to speak ;
I could but lean on breast and cheek,
And prove my passion wildly weak.

He drew me in. I still was dumb,
Panting for words that would not come,
But only tears instead, and sobs,
And broken syllables, and throbs,
With which hearts beat, whom rapture robs
Of all save love's delirium.

"Why hast thou come?" I heard him say.

"There is no hour of night or day,
The coming of thy worshipped feet
Would not make richer or more sweet.

O come ! come ! come ! Yes, come away !

Nay, *never* come, love ! rather, stay !

I must or miss you, or not meet ;

Absence is long, and presence fleet.

And I am dead, when thou away !

But why to-night, and here ? ” I saw

Love’s brightness overcast by awe ;

And terror in his face o’ercame

The terror in my weakened frame ;

Till listening to his voice, I caught

Contagion from his steadier thought,

And found at length the words I sought.

With rapid lips I told him all,

What had befallen—might befall—

The hateful lust, the lustful hate,

The threats of one who, well he knew,

If false in love, in wrath was true,

And our impending fate.

“ ’Twas this alone I came to tell,

And, Leszko ! now ’tis told, farewell ! ”

I murmured with a faltering tongue.

Round me his arms he tightly flung,

And “ Never ! ” cried. “ Thy faith shall foil

The base assassins of our soil.

By the harmonious orbs that shine,

To-night, within that dome divine,

What thou hast promised me, must be mine !

Before to-morrow’s sun can sink,

May deeds be done I would not name,

And vengeance wreaked I dare not think.

If thus you went, ’twere vain you came !

To-night is ours, and, seized, will be

Ours, ours, through all eternity.

The dawn shall find us kneeling where
Passion is purified by prayer ;
And hands of patriot priest shall bless
And bind our premature caress.
If we are parted then, we part,
One, one in body, breast, and heart.
Hate, lust, and tyranny, in vain
Will strive to snap the cherished chain
That we around ourselves have bound.

Vanda ! my love ! my wife ! my more !
If more be in love's language found,
Let them not baulk the troth we swore !
Wed me with bonds not fiends can sever,
And be thou mine—if once—for ever ! ”

* * * * *

The winds of the morn began to stir,

And the stars began to pale ;
We could feel the chill of the moving air,
And the lifting of the veil
That covers the face of the shrinking night,
Its dreams, its dangers, its delight.
We started up. We listened, heard
The pipe of an awaking bird ;
Another—then another still—
Louder and longer, and more shrill,
Till every copse began to fill
With music piercing bitter, fell,
The discord of our forced farewell.
We clung one moment, panted, kissed,
Then bravely rending us, he cried—
“ Back through the curling morning mist,
Vanda ! my love ! my life ! my bride !
•

A few brief hours, and side by side
Before Heaven's altar we shall stand,
As now in heart, then one in hand,
Then—be the future blest or curst—
Let Poland's tyrants wreak their worst!
One—one more kiss!"

“‘ We leaned, to give
The richest of all boons that live,
But paused, half given! . . . We each had
heard

A sound that was no waking bird,
Nor stealthy footfall of the night,
Scudding the unseen tracks of flight.
The noise of human voices broke
Upon our ears ; the words they spoke
Came nearer and more near.

We clung in silence ; 'twas too late
To more than bide the feet of fate,
And face them without fear.
Loudest among them I could trace
The voice I hated most on earth ;
Another moment, and his face,
Lit with vindictiveness and mirth,
Was gazing on our checked embrace.
His myrmidons were at his heel :
I did not shrink, I did not reel,
But closer clung, to make him feel
I loathed him and his alien race.
I know no more. Unarmed we stood.
I heard the clank of ordered steel,
Then suddenly a blinding hood
Over my head was flung, and I,

Powerless to struggle, see, or cry,
Felt myself wrenched from arms that fain
Had fenced my freedom, but in vain,
And, doubtful did he live or die,
Borne through the chilly morning air,
Bound, stifled, cooped with dumb despair !'

"She paused, and strove for breath, as
though

The mere remembrance of that hour,
Though fled and faded long ago,
Retained the never-dying power
To choke and stifle her again,
And leave her dumb and dark, as then.
But mute no less I sate ; and she
The horror in my stare could see,

The speechless, open-mouthed suspense,
That kept me gazing there, to know
If I had heard the worst from woe,
Or if I must prepare my sense
For outrage deeper, more intense,
And from extremity of wrong
Become invulnerably strong.
'O no!' she cried, for swift she guessed
The hell of anguish in my breast;
'O no! not *that*! My boy! thou art
The child of love and not of hate,
Memento of my only mate!
The birth of heart convulsed on heart
With rapture pure and passionate!
Though never more upon my breast
His breast did beat, his head did rest;

Though I no more beheld his eye
Beaming above me like the sky
When all is bright and all is high,
And by which gazed on, one is blest ;
Though ne'er again his touch, his breath,
Was blent with mine, to make me feel
That something betwixt life and death,
When the converging senses reel,
And, through devotedness divine,
Joy knows not what it suffereth ;—
No other hand has soiled the shrine ;
And, Leszko lost ! though lost, yet mine,
My senses, as my soul, kept thine !'

“ She saw the shadow quit my brow ;
But, as it crept away, the light

Seemed to desert her temples now.

The hand she had imprisoned tight
In hers, while travelling wildly back
To passion's bourne o'er sorrow's track,
She loosed, and half let go. 'Hast heard,
Hast drunk, hast understood, each word,'
Slowly she asked, 'my lips have said ?
Ours was no sanctioned marriage-bed.
No priestly blessing, altar's rite,
Confirmed the nuptials of that night.
Leszko ! thou art——'

" 'Twas not her tongue

That paused upon the bitter word,
But that before the name I heard
I shrink not from, my arms I flung
Around her sainted neck and showered

The love with which my soul was stirred.
I kissed her knees, her hands devoured,
I hushed her mouth, I sealed her eyes,
With kisses blent with broken cries,
Such as from baffled lips arise
When bursting hearts are overpowered
With sense of sublime sacrifice.
'Mother!' I cried, 'I'd sooner be
The child of love, and him, and thee,
Than bear or boast the tightest ties
Altars can knit or priests devise !
If love, faith, country cannot bind
Two souls through love already blent,
Where among mortals shall we find
Solemnity or Sacrament ?
And were aught wanting to complete

In face of God's just judgment-seat,
Thy snapped-off love and life,
The tyrant's outrage, years of wrong,
Have weaved thee wedlock doubly strong,
And made thee more than wife !'

“ She smoothed my hair, caressed my brow ;
Consoling tears coursed down her cheek,
Furrowed by sorrow's barren plough :
She stroked my hand, she strove to speak :
' Yes, Leszko ! Holier bond was ne'er
Sanctioned by heaven or sealed by prayer.
Let others deem that formal vows
Breathed between kneeling spouse and spouse,
Can sanctify a link where each
Is but the slave of ordered speech ;

Where vanity, ambition, greed,
Are the base instincts that precede
 The purest of the passions, sent
Life's desolate low steps to lead
 Up to the star-thronged firmament ;
Let others fancy, if they will,
 That pomp, and compliment, and smile,
 Are sacramental bonds, though guile
And calculating coldness fill
 The hollows of the heart the while ;
Let those, too, scorn me who have knelt
 In fancied faithfulness, and sworn
The eternal troth they thought they felt,
 But, soon as they were left to mourn
One to whose flesh their flesh they vowed
Not more in marriage-sheet than shroud,

After a few short trappings worn
To silence the censorious crowd,
Have let their facile feelings melt
Unto some second fancy, nursed
In the same lap where burned the first !
Let them !—Nor pomp nor pandars gave
Me unto him ! 'Twas love alone
Anointed us ; and not the grave,
Not life, not death, shall e'er deprave
The body that remains his own.
Not mine a fault for which to crave
By Heaven or mortal to be shriven.
If I a suppliant need to be
To any, 'tis, my boy, to thee !
And I by thee am all forgiven !

“ ‘ Yet—yet—that night of shining joy
Its shadow flings athwart thy life ;
I am not, I can ne’er be wife,
And thou art no one’s son, our boy !
His name I gave thee, and despite
Their jugglery of wrong and right,
It shall thou bear, whate’er betide.
But who can give thee aught beside ?
Bastard thou art ! and thou canst claim,
It boots not what thy blood, thy fame,
Thy father’s features, manly age,
Only a bastard’s heritage.
But, Leszko ! who would care to boast
All that the rightful covet most ;
Who, who would wish to clutch and hold
Honour, or rank, or lands, or gold,

When lands, and gold, and rank, but be
A brighter badge of slavery ?

They who have nothing may excuse

Submission to the tyrant's beck ;

Too bare and beggared to refuse

Unsavoury morsel from the hand

That plants the heel upon the neck

Of their assassinated land.

But they who yet have aught to lose,

Base must they be if they can use

What still is left to them, to deck

The mourning of their country's wreck.

Be sure thy sire doth not retain

What would but aggravate his pain.

Of me, of love, when dispossessed,

How would he care to keep the rest ?

Robbed of my arms, his arms would find
But emptiness in all behind,
Vacuous air and moaning wind.
Who tore me from him, must have torn
With it long since the worldly dregs
Easy resigned by him who begs
That death at least to him be kind,
And bans the day that he was born !

“ ‘ Nay, ask not if he lives. I know
Nothing, since that cold dawn of woe.
Once more I had to hear, and bear,
The vengeful menace, lustful prayer,
Of one who sued, but would not spare.
He threatened he would blazen wide
That which he dared to call my shame.

Guess how I answered! I defied,

Exulted, and with patriot pride

Told him that I myself to fame

Would trumpet forth the deed that I

Had done to foil the treachery

Already hatching, and by whom !

He cursed me. That was his reply.

But mine, alas ! had sealed my doom.

“ ‘Twas over, quick. I saw no more

Familiar face, or roof, or floor,

Or anything I knew before.

My eyes were bandaged, limbs were bound,

As through rough distance on we wound,

Aware but of the unseen ground

We traversed ever, day and night.

At length they gave me back my sight ;
And lo ! there stretched before, around,
The desert steppe, inhuman, bare,
That answered me with stare for stare.
I gazed around me for some face,
Some answering look, some kindred guise,
Some woe that I might recognize
Even in this desert place.
But none of all I saw, I knew ;
And never one among them threw
A pitying glance on me.
So desolate it seemed, I should
Have thankful been if there had stood
Before me even he
Who thuswise had my ruin wrought.
I vow to you, his face I sought,

Among the convoy, early, late.

No face, no fiend, my exiled fate

Could now or better make or worse :

And it to me relief had brought

Could I have seen him, but to hate,

And greeted, but to curse !

“ ‘ A mute and melancholy band,

For days and weeks we journeyed on,

Across a bare and level land,

On which the fierce sun ever shone,

But whence all life and growth were gone,

Utterly, as from salt-steeped strand.

Dawn after dawn, the steppe stretched round :

It seemed to have no halt, no end,

Centre, circumference, nor bound,

No sight, no shade, no scent, no sound ;
But ever we appeared to wend
Into eternal exile, doomed
To make the endless track we trod,
Now over sand, now scanty sod,
Where nought save blight and canker bloomed.
Though on we gasped, no goal was gained ;
Further we went, further remained,
As when thought struggles after God :
Save that, instead, we seemed to go
Towards infinity of woe.
Many we were, but each alone.
We durst not with each other speak,
And but exchanged a tear or groan.
The strong might not assist the weak,
And to be child or woman gave

No privilege or power, save
To suffer more and be more brave.
So wretched were we, we could bless
A lighter load of wretchedness ;
And when at last the cruel sun
Began to pity us, and leave
In sleep our pain a short reprieve,
We almost felt our griefs were done.
We knew not they had scarce begun.
Into another land we passed,
Drearier and deader than the last,
That knows no future and no past,
But only one fixed present !—land
Where nothing waxeth more or less,
Nothing is born and nothing dies,
And where, 'neath never-changing skies,

E'en frozen time itself doth stand
Immutable and motionless !
A land of snow and snow-fed wind,
Which freeze the blood, congeal the mind,
And harden man against mankind :
Region of death that is not dead,
But ever on its icy bed
Lies dying, and must ever lie,
Forbid to live, forbid to die !

“ ‘ And, as its doom, such too seemed mine,
The doom of deathlessness in death.
In vain I used to pray and pine
The greedy cold would suck my breath,
And leave my empty husk to bleach
On the untrodden waste of white,

And draw the prowling jackal's screech,
Or give the wolf one foul delight.

“ ‘One night, as, prostrate in despair
At each unanswered tear and prayer;
I blasphemed God, and wildly swore
That if at least He would not give
Me death, I would no longer live,
But would myself the torture end,
That had nor change, nor hope, nor friend,
Sudden I started, gave a cry ;

I seemed as changed to flesh from stone :

Oh ! joy ! I was no more alone.

And then for worlds I would not die !

’Twas thou ! ’twas thou ! my babe ! my boy !

In joylessness my more than joy !

My more than heaven 'mid more than
hell !

Weeping, upon my knees I fell,
And prayed forgiveness for my sin.

What now to me or cold or heat,

My shivering head, my burning feet,
Hunger or ache ? I held within

The memory of that midnight sweet.

I had no thought for things without :

Sensation, suffering, struggle, doubt,
Each sense wherewith we feel, hear, see,
Was concentrated inwardly.

My aim was how to feed the root
That in the silence 'gan to shoot,
And pulsed with promise of the fruit.
Sometimes, in fresh access of woe,

Hope veered, and longed that thou and I
Lay underneath the snug, warm snow,
Together, and with none to know ;
But swung back ever, true and high,
From desperation's gusty strife,—
Pointing from love and set towards life !

“ ‘ You lived ! ’ . . . ‘ O mother ! ’ here I cried,
‘ Tell me no more ! I cannot bear
The tale of love, and grief, and pride.
Is't not enough that now we share
Pride, love, and exile, side by side ?
And, let what will of wrong betide,
No wrong *my* youth, at least, shall tear,
From your soft hand and silvery hair ! ’

“ ‘What, Leszko ! Leszko’s son !’ she said,

Her voice was grave, her tears were fled :

‘ Think you I told this tale of woe,

To stir your love for me, I know,

Will hold you living, haunt you dead ?

Not quit my side, luxurious boy !

Share anguish that is almost joy,

To shrink from pain without alloy !

By all my hopes of husband fled,

My interrupted marriage-bed,

I charge you, bid you, not to cling,

To me, to love, to anything !

Not leave me ! What is this I hear ?

The mawkish kiss, the vapid tear,

Not flashing eye and springing spear !’

She pushed me off. ‘ It cannot be

His patriot seed and mine I see.
Thou art some changeling ! Go, then, go !
And hunt the lynx across the snow,
And when the blue-eyed scyllas blow,
 Gather thereof a dainty bunch,
To woo some daughter of the foe,
 While jackals and hyenas crunch
 Thy country's flesh and bones, and bloom
No flowers, of all Spring used to know,
 Save such as mourn o'er Poland's tomb !
For Poland, I from him was torn,
 For Poland, he from me ! But thou—
Thou, thou forsooth, must cling on now,
 Like infant that, from threatened hurt
 Flies whimpering, to thy mother's skirt,
Dead unto duty as to scorn !

Bastard, indeed, thou doubly wert,
And both are shamed that thou wast
born !’

“ I knelt me down ; towards the ground

I bowed my head in lowly guise.

I did not dare to raise my eyes,

But when at last my voice I found,

‘ Mother ! ’ I cried, ‘ I am not base,

Nor bastard, and his blood is mine ;

But gazing on thy holy face,

I all forgot a woe, a wrong,

Sadder, more sacred, e’en than thine.

But now thy strength hath made me strong,

And in my features thou shalt trace,

And in my soul, that I belong

Unto a noble name and race.'

I stood up straight. There was no sign

Of melting in my voice or gaze.

'When shall I go?' I said, 'The ways

Are not more ready stretched than I

To start at once, to run, to fly,

Whither thy sharp reproaches point.

Mother, farewell! In every joint

I feel the blood of Poland stir.

She is my mother! I for her

Can lonely live, will lonely die.'

" 'Kneel then once more!' she said. I knelt,

But this time with unbending brow.

Her face fawned towards me, and I felt

Her lips upon me, tender now.

She took the cross from off her breast,
Passed its cord softly o'er my head :
' I have no sword to give,' she said,
' But you will find one 'mong the dead
That now lie thick—though baffled, blest—
Among the forests where, once more,
Poland renews the hopeless strife,
And liberates with lavish gore,
Awhile, the fever of its life.

Listen ! There shortly start from hence
Two fresh battalions of the foe,
For Poland bound. They doubtless go
To aid their kindred's violence.

You must march with them o'er the snow.
Nay, start not ! must their colours wear,
Aye, boy ! must false allegiance swear

To their detested Pontiff-Czar !

Such perjuries, I tell thee, are

Not heard at Heaven's just judgment-bar.

And if thy lips abhor the lie,

Poland absolves thee—so do I !'

“ The hour had come, and face to face

We stood, my mother, there, and I.

We did not fondle nor embrace ;

She did not weep, I did not sigh.

I wore the trappings of the race

That battens upon Poland's heart ;

So, well I knew that uncaressed,

Unfolded to her craving breast,

I from her must depart.

‘ Have you the cross ? ’ she asked. I laid

My hand where 'gainst my heart it lay,
But did not speak. ' Both night and day,
 Brood on it, as a constant maid
 Broods on the face that cannot fade,
When he who loves her is away !
It was the one dumb thing on earth
 That spoke to me ; the only one,
Dead, that was eloquent of birth ;
 So have I given it thee, my son !
I have no gift of his, no toy,
 No trinket, trifle, leaf, nor flower,
Naught to remind me of my joy.
 But it was on my breast that hour,
That night, when it, and it alone,
Was 'twixt his bosom and my own.
Go, now ! And I will nightly pray

The *Queen of Poland, we may meet,
When bitter has been turned to sweet,
And earthly dark to heavenly day !'
I bent. She raised her hands to bless ;
And then I went without caress,
And left her to her loneliness.

“ Why tell the rest ? Too well you know,
Ah ! you, free child of Freedom's shore,
That spurred our hopes, but lent no blow
In aid of all our wasted gore,
How Poland, maddened, rose once more,
And blindly struck at friend and foe.
Why should I tell—the tale, too long !—

* The Virgin is regarded by the Poles as Queen of Poland, in the same way as, in 1529, Christ was elected and proclaimed, by the Great Council, King of Florence.

Of the weak writhing 'gainst the strong,
Pricked by reiterated wrong ?
The orphaned pillows, rifled roofs,
The sudden rush of trampling hoofs,
 The reeking village, blazing town ;
The perjured charge, the traitor's mesh,
The virgin's lacerated flesh ;
The wail of childhood, helpless fair,
Frenzy itself had stopped to spare ;
 Priests at the altar stricken down,
Mingling their blood with that of Christ,
While sacrificing, sacrificed ;
Chaste spouses of the cloister, weaned
From earth, and from Earth's passions screened,
Shrieking beneath the clutch of fiend,
And outraged, less from lust than hate,

In refuges inviolate.—

Enough ! Had Hell broke loose, and sent
Its demons forth, on man to vent
The tortures God's maligners feign
Heaven vents on *them*, they would in vain
Have striven to paragon the pain
Poland's oppressors knew to wreak
Upon the sensitive and weak,
When we, the strong, their strength defied,
And Freedom, foiling despots, died.

“ I was too late. 'Twas nearly o'er ;
But straight I sloughed the garb I wore,
And joined one last determined band,
Who to the border forests clung
That sever from the Tartar's hand

That share of our partitioned land
Which owns a rule more just and bland,
 Keeping at least its creed and tongue.
We did not think with fate to cope ;
No ! vengeance was our only hope,
 And vengeance to me came.
We were pursued by one who gave
No mercy or to faint or brave :
 I heard, and knew his name.
'Twas he, whose lust had torn apart
For ever loving heart from heart,
 As far as hatred can.
We lay in ambush ; they were caught,
And could not fly, so mercy sought.
 We slew them, to a man !
He fell to me ! One thrust I made,

And at my feet I saw him laid :

I sucked the blood from off my blade :

Christ ! it was sweet ! aye, sweeter far
Than the smile of home, than the kiss of maid,
Or the glow of the evening star !

“ It was the last blow struck. We fled

Across the frontier, each as best

A gap could gain, and left the dead

To stock the unclean raven's nest.

Exile once more, though all the earth

Henceforth lay open to my tread,

All save the one that gave me birth,

I saw no goal except the one

Where, sitting mute in deepest dearth,
The mother waited for the son.

But how ? I donned the pedlar's pack,
And started on the trackless track,
 Day after day, league after league,
 Fatigue slow-linked with slow fatigue,
But ever getting nearer back
Unto the larch-log fire where she
Sat patiently, awaiting me.
And there was yet another sight
 Behind, to spur my flagging tread :
The foe, the fiend, I felled in fight,
 And gloated over, dead !
 Could I have borne his hated head,
And laid it at my mother's feet !
 The very thought fresh vigour gave,
And made my final footsteps fleet.
 I raved. You deem that still I rave.

What think you that they found? Her grave.

“ Back, back across the cruel waste,
Her tomb behind, my life before ;—
An ebbing wave that raced and raced,
But ne’er could hope to find a shore,
Not e’en a rock ’gainst which to break :
A vista of unending ache,
Trode and endured for no one’s sake !
Rather than live without some end,
Such misery fresh woe will make,
And woo misfortune for a friend.
And I, since it was vain to hope
That I could find, where’er I ran,
Solace or happiness, began
For further wretchedness to grope.

Now other object had I none,
From rise of day to set of sun,
 Except to seek my sire ;
Though well I knew I should not find,
Or finding, curse the fate unkind
 That balked not my desire.
And fate was ruthless to the last.
Five years of bootless search had passed,
 And still I sought. But when on fire,
Her roofs delirious Paris saw,
I found him stretched on sordid straw.
He had not fought for crowd or law :
Sooth, had he wished, he could not draw
A sword from scabbard now, nor lift
 His body from its borrowed bed.
His brackish life was ebbing swift.

He who had eaten beggar's bread,
And known each sad and sordid shift

That just sustains the exile's tread,
Needed no more the stranger's gift.

I knelt me down beside his head,
And breathed her name into his ear.

There came no start, no word, no tear :

His brain was deaf ; he did not know

The difference now 'twixt joy and woe,

'Twixt love and hate, 'twixt friend and foe,

'Twixt me and any other ! Vain

My years of search and sought-for pain.

Yet not quite vain. Upon his breast

A silver locket hung ; and when

I stretched my hand to it, he pressed

'Gainst it his own, nor loosed again,

Until he passed away to rest.

I took it when his grasp grew cold,

And lo ! it was my mother's face !

Not as I knew her, blanched and old,

But in the glow of youth and grace,

With eyes of heaven and hair of gold,

And all the passion of her race.

I wear it and its rusted chain.

I put her cross there in its place :

The iron cross ; yes, cross indeed !

And iron, too ! the fitting meed

Of those who for wronged Poland bleed,

And ever bleed in vain !

“ Rise quick, ye winds ! Race swift, ye waves !

And bear me where blue Danube rolls,

Past Orsova's loud-foaming caves,
On 'twixt armed hosts of rival slaves,
 To scatter among Euxine shoals.
Now, do you ask why hence I fly
 To join the Moslem camp, and hurl
My poor weak life, foredoomed to die,
 On those who Freedom's flag unfurl
 For Christian boor and Slavick churl?—
Out on the sacrilegious lie!
Robbers, assassins, liars, slaves!
Whose feet are fresh from outraged graves!
Let those among you, dupes, or worse,
Sucklings of falsehood, or its nurse,
Believe that Russian arms can bear
To others aught except a share
In chains themselves consent to wear!

Let them ! But I ! Did Tartar swords
Storm hell, and Turkish steel defend,
I would the infernal Cause befriend
Against the worse than demon hordes
Who to the damned would bring fresh curse,
And enter Hell, to make it worse !”

THE END.

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